Over planned and under organized: On target but missing the mark

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The release of the Pope’s Encyclical earlier this summer set the stage for his historic visit to the United States and his address to both houses of Congress. What a perfect opportunity for the interfaith community to respond with multiple corresponding events in Washington DC that week, both before and after his address. The Moral Action for Climate became the central group organizing or at least reporting on the various events that were materializing. I am sure that there were all sorts of logistical problems working with the various agencies of the National Park service for the use of the National Mall, police and other security, and the City’s departments and Metro. I am sure that money or a sense of lack thereof played a role in the delayed decisions and commitments to the layout of events and timing. Without the confidence of knowing what was going to happen—where, when, and how many would participate—it seems that many people decided not to join those of us who had committed to the events that week.

Two weeks before the event, the organizers moved the overnight vigil to a new location. Only two days before the vigil, I found out that there were only two faith groups signed up to lead an hour of prayer that night. This was not shaping up to be the exciting build up to the Pope’s speech that I thought it might be. While nice, the group of 200 or so attendees that were there for the first set of presentations had dwindled to around a hundred for the two prayer sessions. Maybe 10 of us spent the night to finish the vigil.

Earlier that evening we were discussing whether we would have to move the Friends’ meeting spot because of the anticipation of crowds. When we arrived at the location a little before the appointed time, it was evident that there were plans by many for a lot of people to be joining us on the Mall.
Huge jumbotron video screens and speaker towers had been set up to serve the expected crowd from the stage area just west of Third Street all the way to Seventh Street. It was equally evident that there were not enough people moving in to meet those expectations. The pre-speech presentations started at 7:30 AM and by the time Moby was leaving the stage just before the speech, there were several thousand of us there to watch. We were vastly outnumbered by the ticketed area set up on the west lawn of the Capitol that held roughly 25,000 seats.

During the lead-up time I remembered an old poster that read "Suppose they gave a war and nobody came?" Suppose climate change is real and nobody came?

Friends, we have our work cut out for us.
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